

A PLANNER'S PERSPECTIVE

focus

New Urbanism has a passionate following. Membership in the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU) is appended professionally to the end of names, ranking with PhD or AICP. The founders speak of their first meeting in Algonquin tone¹, replete with recitation of how the name emerged. It is a most necessary movement: the congealing of sprawl. Sixty years of tract houses, ubiquitous, proliferous, and in their use of land, often ridiculous. This needed to be changed. But why did it take so long? Why did earlier attempts to derail sprawl fail—remember neo-traditionalism? Why does it now seem to have traction?

This last question might be answered thus: architects got involved. They get things done, i.e. built. Having these designers step beyond their buildings into the public space has generated this most recent momentum in urban compact design. So dominated by that profession, my late business partner Paul Crawford began a talk to CNU with a play on the alcoholic's apology "My name is Paul, and I'm a planner." The architects laughed. Kaiser Rangwala warned planners that architects would "eat their lunch," asserting that planners had retreated into entitlement bureaucracy, and too far from urban design.² Architects would now not only design, but arrange the buildings and determine their use in the realm formerly recognized as the planner's.

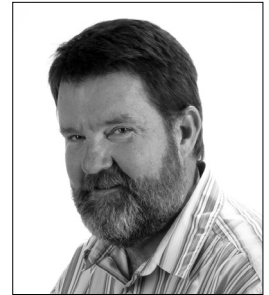
With that, and with no apology, I state that I am a planner. (I am also a lawyer, and for that I often apologize). I have seen new urbanism in practice. I have seen the truly inspired designs that end the suburb. But I have also witnessed a great number of dead ends, dangerous paths, and false hopes.

A few weeks back, the City Council of Visalia, California voted to "send back to the drawing board" a compact mixed use, pedestrian friendly model of good design. Why? Because the developers didn't want it, said they could not afford it, and would fight building it. In this recession, cost is a strong message. The argument was well received that this development was elaborate.

But aren't these cheaper than standard subdivisions? Probably so in their ultimate form. The roads are narrower, buildings compact, and land to unit ratios much lower. It was not stated this way, but the developers argued in essence that they could mete out the costs of the old subdivision, building on a few lots at a time. It was more difficult/costly to build a development that needed a large critical mass to be coherent. This as opposed to a standard subdivision that just needed streets, utilities and "lot for sale" signs.

I have attended a number of charrettes where new urbanist principles are embedded in specific plans for the redevelopment of older downtowns, for a revitalization of suburban sprawl, and to create new communities in greenfields where none exist now. They all have their challenges. In the older downtowns, success is more likely when transit opportunities create a demand for compact housing. However, the costly retrofitting of buildings into the mandates of the new regulating plans and codes is not always accounted for. And perhaps the strongest impediment is a reluctant public works director. I have seen them watch from the back of the room while designers fashion narrower streets and fewer parking spaces—worlds the engineers think will be less friendly to fire trucks and utilities. In the excitement generated by the charrette, their voice is stalled. They wait until the initial process is over, then report to the City Manager or Mayor that the design won't pencil out, or will have safety issues or will result in too many cars with no place to go. They know how to keep mute during the meetings powered by architects and planners. They know that their moment will arrive, when they are not combating the excitement of the feverish charrette, when they can quietly and effectively send the plan to the shelf. I have seen it happen a half dozen times.

The charrette is a brilliant tool for design. It short circuits the long, linear process that most planning efforts must endure. In a few days, with the right professionals around the table and the public in clear view, iterations of ideas can occur in moments, rather than be spread apart by draft reports, email exchanges and long weekends and the holidays. One charrette I was involved with generated nearly 2000 working hours in a 10 day period. That is one working person's year.



Chris Clark is full time lecturer at the City and Regional Planning Department. He is principal at Crawford Multari & Clark, San Luis Obispo.

¹ *The first meeting was in the Ahmanee Hotel, in the Yosemite Park, California.*

² *Rangwala, Kaizer. Retooling Planners, Places volume 17 # 1, pages 84-85, winter 2005.*

The resulting plan was wonderful. However, it pushed under the carpet a nasty intersection problem. A thoroughfare needed to push through the downtown, cross a commuter rail line, and over an adjacent ravine. The Utilities Commission had balked at the at-grade rail crossing, and the solution was either build a massive (six lane) bridge or ignore the connection. Given the excitement and speed with which the charrette was proceeding, the connection was ignored. It was left to some future project. The design would all but preclude a bridge, setting up a nasty future fight with the Commission.

Such issues are legion for planners. In these days there are no easy projects left. All the easy stuff has long been done. The work these days is with brownfields, the leftover awkward sites, and redevelopment. Unless you are out in the middle of nowhere, and there you are dealing with endangered species, wetlands and cultural remains. So planners are more adept now at shouldering the burdens of the tough problems, working out solutions that involve many publics and public works directors. Sometimes solving these problems takes months and years – beyond the horizon of the charrette.

When an architect designs a building, it is reasonable for them to expect that it will be built soon, within a handful of years. And that the entire thing designed will be built. It is not so with planning projects. Look at any downtown. Perhaps the one you grew up near. How much has it changed in the last fifty to seventy years? In most cities, not much. New buildings, yes. A complete rebuilding of the urban fabric? Unlikely.

And so here is another dilemma. When I see a rendering of a bold new building, I can expect that it will shortly be realized. The finished product looks like the edifice in the handsome drawing, except the trees aren't as mature. Not so in planning. Except when a large developer can come in with extraordinary resources, the picture in the specific plan will not be realized for years, decades, or perhaps, ever.

Buildings will change one at a time. Some will be granted unfortunate variances. Some will fight the code and only approximate the rendering from the charrette. Some will just sit and continue to occupy the now awkward space they originally inhabited. It will take a very long time to see these great ideas realized. So is it deceptive to sell a revamped downtown with a rendering? Perhaps it is the only way; however, we planners need to be aware of the limitations of change. It is imprudent to oversell the potential for urban change.

I remember a discussion one very late night during a form-based code charrette about an existing subdivision. This area looked like every cul-de-sac development you might imagine. Every home sat back from the sidewalk prominently pushing out front its garage and lawn. An architect asked, "Why don't we require with every future building permit that these houses remodel in a way to get the house fronted on the sidewalk?" I had no response. "Over time, the homes would conform to our new codes. Eventually the subdivision would evolve into true new urbanist principles." I thought, 'Eventually the sun will burn out. I wonder which will happen first.'

I take to heart Mr. Rangwala's admonition, "Where great leaders such as Ebenezer Howard, John Nolen, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Daniel Burnham once produced grand development plans, many planners today seem resigned to the largely bureaucratic function of reviewing and processing development applications. If planners are to continue to make a significant contribution to the communities they serve and take a more active role in the design and construction of urban built form, their education and training will have to provide them with new skills."

Mr. Rangwala is a scholar and a gentleman (and an architect and a planner), and a friend of mine. I hear his message clearly. Planners need to be part of the change when we recreate our cities and suburbs. And we will need to learn the right tools to do this. We will learn from the architects, because they know how to get things done. However, I suggest that the architects should take care when they eat our lunch, that they not take too large a bite.

We all need to take the longer view.